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Rural Northeast Thailand in Transition: Recent Changes and Their Implications for the Long-Term Transformation of the Region

Introduction

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The eight articles in this special issue are revised versions of papers that were presented at an academic conference on the agrarian transformation in Northeast Thailand, held at Khon Kaen University in September 2014. The conference was jointly organized by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) of Kyoto University and the Program on System Approaches in Agriculture of the Faculty of Agriculture, Khon Kaen University (KKU). The first day of the conference was sponsored by the Thailand Research Fund as part of its Basic Research Seminar series, and the second day was sponsored by CSEAS and KKU.

It is widely recognized that Northeast Thailand (Isan) is undergoing a major agrarian transformation that involves a restructuring of agriculture from being subsistence oriented to market oriented. It also involves concomitant changes in all components of the agricultural system, including technology, economic orientation, social relations, and cultural values. Fukui Hayao (1996) may have been the first to apply the term “transformation” to agricultural change in the region. More recently, the broad outlines of this transformation have been described by Terry Grandstaff *et al.* (2008), Jonathan Rigg and Albert Salamanca (2009; 2011), and Charles Keyes (2014); but many aspects of this complex process have not yet received detailed attention or even been recognized as topics for study. Moreover, despite the recognition it has received in academic circles, the extent to which all aspects of rural Northeast Thailand have been changed as a consequence of this transformation has yet to be fully assimilated by the broader Thai public, including political and administrative elites and the media.

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Given this background, we thought it would be useful to organize a conference that would bring together researchers from many disciplines to share their knowledge of the current situation in Northeast Thailand. We sought contributions from well-known senior scholars as well as younger scholars and graduate students who were currently engaged in field research in Isan. Participants represented many different disciplines (anthropology, agricultural science, area studies, medicine, and public health) and were associated with a wide range of Thai and foreign institutions, including several regional universities in the Northeast.

After rigorous peer reviews, eight papers were selected for inclusion in this special issue. The first paper, by A. Terry Rambo, presents an extensive review of recent research on multiple dimensions of the agrarian transformation in Northeast Thailand. It highlights the contributions to our understanding of the transformation made by each of the papers in this issue. The second paper, by Chai Podhisita, relates agricultural changes to household dynamics and expansion of the capitalist economy in rural Thailand. In the third paper, Shirai Yuko and A. Terry Rambo describe changes in household structure and sources of income in a single rice-growing village in Khon Kaen Province.

The fourth paper, by Watanabe Kazuo, describes changes in the rice production system in a single village in Khon Kaen Province. In the fifth paper, Watanabe Moriaki *et al.* examine changes in the trees in the paddy field agroecosystem, also in a single village in Khon Kaen Province. The final three papers examine different aspects of agricultural intensification, diversification, and specialization by smallholder Isan farmers. In the sixth paper, Arunee Promkhambut and A. Terry Rambo present the results of a survey of multiple cropping after rice in all the subdistricts in Khon Kaen Province. In the seventh paper, Chalee Gedgaew *et al.* describe the expansion of contract farming to produce hybrid tomato seed in multiple sites in the region. In the eighth paper, Sorat Praweenwongwuthi *et al.* examine land use changes in two districts along the Mekong River in Nakhon Phanom Province.

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